



Part 1: News Analysis

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Another visible break with Turkmenistan's dictatorial past as well as a presidential pardon of prisoners timed for Victory Day on May 9 helped overshadow critical assessments of Turkmenistan's approach to press and religious freedom that also emerged this week. At a government meeting, President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov unexpectedly announced that an ostentatious tower in the center of Ashgabat built in 1998 by deceased dictator Saparmurat Niyazov was to be removed to a southern district of the city. The president gave no explanation other than that it was "expedient" to place the Arc of Neutrality, as the 256-edifice is titled, on an avenue of the same name. The syringe-shaped structure – capped by a gold-plated figure of Turkmenbashi (Head of all Turkmen), as Niyazov styled himself – rotates once a day to track the sun's path.

Analysts noted, however, that exact plans and timing for the relocation of the statue were not forthcoming, and officials could not say whether just the Turkmenbashi figure at its peak would be taken down or what might go in its place. Russian Central Asian expert Arkady Dubnov told Deutsche Welle that the move was part of a slow but steady dismantling of the Niyazov cult, including removal of his portrait from office walls and some bank notes. Yet Dubnov as well as domestic critics cautioned that the gesture was not a substitute for real reforms such as removing Internet controls, loosening state oversight of the media, and releasing long-held political prisoners.

More disappointment was in store for human rights groups after analyzing the much-publicized Victory Day amnesty of 923 convicts. The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights pointed out that not a single political prisoner was included in the presidential pardon, and 75 percent of those released were convicted in 2008. Political opponents sentenced for the alleged coup attempt against Niyazov in 2002 remain in prison, including Boris Shikhmuradov, the former foreign minister who has been held incognito since that time.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom released a critical annual report this week, urging Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice not to remove Turkmenistan from the list of "countries of particular concern" that violate religious liberty. USCIRF noted some positive steps such as the release of Turkmenistan's chief mufti in a previous amnesty, but said the government has failed to legalize either faith-based or secular groups and still emphasizes Niyazov's spiritual *Ruhnama* text in public education.

The Paris-based media watchdog group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) included Turkmenistan again in its list of "Predators of the Free Press" in a report timed for World Press Freedom Day on May 3. RSF warned that the state maintained its monopoly over the media, censored broadcasts including those from neighboring Russia, and blocked controversial Internet sites. Mindful of a string of recent dismissals and reprimands of media officials, RSF commented that the president "criticizes the media more often than he supports it."

TIHR issued a detailed report this week concerning another disturbing aspect of total state control over media – the mandatory subscription to propagandistic periodicals and the forced deduction of their cost from paychecks. Numerous teachers, doctors, police and other state employees are forcibly signed up to professional publications as well as state papers like *Neitral'niy Turkmenistan*. TIHR also reported on claims from TV staff that a female anchor's allegedly too-low neckline may have been behind presidential reprimands of Minister of Culture Shadurdy Alovov. Environmental activists who asked TV to cover their work

at a nature preserve were told they could not be filmed in jeans and t-shirts but had to appear in Turkmen national dress.

While rights groups at home and abroad express dissatisfaction with Berdymukhamedov's largely superficial reform gestures, Western governments and international agencies continue to praise and engage with the Turkmen government. A visiting IMF team welcomed recent moves to unify the state and commercial exchange rates for the dollar and expressed continued support for economic and financial reforms such as the redenomination of the currency.

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1. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

a. U.S. Religious Freedom Commission Recommends Turkmenistan for "Country of Particular Concern" List

Original title: USCIRF Names 11 Countries of Particular Concern, Keeps Vietnam on the List. Synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Source: US Commission on International Religious Freedom/05/02/08

Full version: http://www.uscifr.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2191&Itemid=1

Synopsis: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) included Turkmenistan on its list of 11 proposed "countries of particular concern" (CPCs), USCIRF reported in a press release on its website May 2. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act requires that the U.S. government designate as CPCs countries that routinely violate freedom of religion or belief.

In a May 1 letter to Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, the USCIRF recommended that Turkmenistan remain on the CPC list for "engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom."

According to the CIRF's 2008 report:

"Significant religious freedom problems and official harassment of religious adherents persist in Turkmenistan, where police raids and other forms of harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continue more than a year after the death of longtime dictator Saparmurat Niyazov. The repressive 2003 religion law remains in force, causing severe difficulties for the legal functioning of religious groups. The government is still promoting the former president's personality cult in the form of the Ruhnama in religious affairs and as a mandatory feature of public education. Although the new president has taken some isolated

steps, including the release of the country's former chief mufti, systemic legal reforms directly related to religious freedom and other human rights have not been made. Turkmenistan's removal from the Commission's CPC list is therefore not warranted."

b. Turkmenistan Still in RSF's List of "Predators of Press Freedom"

Original title: Turkmenistan: Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, President

Source: Reporters Without Borders/rsf.org/05/03/08. Synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=13592 (press release); http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=26796 (Turkmenistan report)

Synopsis: In a statement commemorating World Press Freedom Day on May 3, Paris-based watchdog group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) included Turkmenistan's President Berdymukhamedov in a list of 36 "Predators of Press Freedom" whom they said had the power to "censor, imprison, kidnap, torture, and in the worst cases, murder journalists."

"Despite statements of intention and reforms indicating a page has been turned on the more fantastic aspects of his predecessor's regime, Berdymukhamedov clearly does not regard improving freedom of expression as a priority" one year after succeeding Saparmurat Niyazov as president, said RSF.

"Although Berdymukhamedov has made some progress in other reforms and has shown a desire to end his country's isolation, "he criticizes the Turkmen media more often than he supports it," RSF noted.

"The state's absolute monopoly of the media has not disappeared and the opening of a few Internet cafés in 2007 does not offset the government's continuing direct control of the media's editorial policies. Even Russian TV stations are censored before re-transmission. Detained journalists and human rights activists were not included in prisoner amnesties announced by the new president," the watchdog group said.

2. DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS

a. Golden Statue of 'Turkmenbashi' Retired to Suburbs

Original title: Turkmenistan To Move Gold Statue of Turkmenbashi

Source: Reuters/05/03/08 Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: <http://in.reuters.com/article/lifestyleMolt/idINL0355546520080503>

Synopsis: A rotating gold statue of Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan's deceased dictator, is to be removed from the center of Ashgabat to the outskirts, Reuters and state media reported. The removal of the 246-foot syringe-shaped edifice was seen as further attempt by current President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov to disassociate himself from some parts of Niyazov's oppressive legacy. The tower, known as the "Arch of Neutrality" for Turkmenistan's neutral status, is capped by a gold-plated figure of Turkmenbashi (Head of All Turkmen), as Niyazov styled himself. The statue is set to rotate once a day to track the sun's path.

"It is expeditious to place this monumental construction in the south of the city where the prospect with the same name starts." Berdymukhamedov said at a government meeting. It was not clear whether Niyazov's statue would remain atop the structure.

b. Applause for Reforms Premature with Statue Removal in Ashgabat

Original title: Golden Turkmenbashi Moved to the Backyard of the "Empire"

Source: Deutsche Welle/gundogar.org/05/05/08. Translation and synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: <http://www.gundogar.org/?021904612200000000000011000000>

Synopsis: With the monument to former Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov newly slated for removal to a southern district of Ashgabat Deutsche Welle (DW) commentators Aysha Berdyev and Vitaly Volkov ask whether the relocation represents a dismantling of the dictatorship or the freeing of space for a new idol, gundogar.org reports.

The monument was built in 1998 to celebrate the third anniversary of Turkmenistan's proclaimed neutrality, independence, and national integrity and grew world-famous as a symbol of ostentatious dictatorship. The new president has rationalized the move as an attempt to create an architectural ensemble matching the neutrality monument with a suburban avenue of the same name. But the DW experts believe the decision is not justified, given the cost and difficulties of relocating the monument. A city hall official contacted about the removal plans could not specify the date, nor could the official say whether the entire object is to be removed, or just the revolving image at its apex.

A local reporter interviewed by DW who asked not to be named said the removal seemed to be a cosmetic gesture meant to impress foreigners with Berdymukhamedov's apparent willingness to remove the trappings of dictatorship. Meanwhile, locals were fed a story that the statute would be more appropriate in the suburban setting.

While the plans for the statue's removal and the recent reversion to standard calendar names may have created the impression of reform, the state remains in control of all political and economic life. Central Asia expert Arkady Dubnov said the relocation of "the grill," as the revolving statue was nicknamed, was consistent with slow but steady efforts to dismantle Niyazov's cult of personality, including: the removal of Niyazov's portrait from most bank note denominations; the disappearance of his picture from office walls and streets; and the return of the Gregorian calendar names. Yet the new president, while making these changes, has retained obstacles to Internet access and done little to loosen the state's control over the media. Jailed political opponents have yet to be given a free trial and released, and it is not known if some of them are still alive. Thus while the changes can be noted, it is too early to applaud, said DW.

c. Turkmen President Pardons 923 Convicts For Victory Day

Original title: Turkmenistan to Pardon More than 900 Convicts Ahead of Victory Day

Source: turkmenistan.ru/05/06/08 Translation and synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=12706&type=event&sort=date_desc

Synopsis: At an expanded government meeting, President Berdymukhamedov ordered the pardoning of 923 convicts to mark the 63rd anniversary of Victory Day, turkmenistan.ru reported. The Turkmen leader authorized heads of law-enforcement agencies to ensure "timely and proper organization of the amnesty." "Former convicts should meet this great holiday with dignity in the circle of their families," turkmenistan.ru quoted him as saying.

d. No Political Prisoners in Turkmen Presidential Pardon: Exiles

Original title: Pardon Action Once Again Does Not Affect Political Prisoners

Source: gundogar.org/05/08/08. Translation and synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: <http://www.gundogar.org/?022500000000000000011062008050000#6129>

Synopsis: The list of convicts pardoned by President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov on the occasion of Victory Day, published in Turkmen state newspapers May 8, does not contain any of those convicted on politically motivated charges, the Turkmen opposition website gundogar.org reported. The site particularly noted the absence of any of those jailed for involvement in the alleged assassination attempt on former President Saparmurat Niyazov on November 25, 2002.

The authorities continue to conceal information about these prisoners' whereabouts and condition from their relatives as well as from representatives of international human rights organizations and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The UN, OSCE, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other groups have appealed repeatedly to the Turkmen government and specifically to the Turkmen president to obtain access to monitor Turkmen prisons as well as to perform an independent investigation of the events of November 25, 2002.

e. Most Pardoned Turkmen Prisoners Were Convicted in 2008

Original title: *Three-Fourths of Prisoners Pardoned Tried in 2008*

Source: gundogar.org/05/05/08. Translation and synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: <http://www.gundogar.org/?022500000000000000011062008050000#6131> A complete list of prisoners is available through this link.

Synopsis: Turkmen opposition website gundogar reported on the demographics of the prisoners pardoned by President Berdymukhamedov in conjunction with Victory Day. About 80 percent are younger than 40; of these, 100 are ages 15-20. Of the 20 percent of detainees older than 40, eight individuals are over 60. Women make up less than one percent of those to be released.

Some 75 percent, or 700 of those pardoned, were tried in 2008; about 25 percent, or about 200, were tried from 2002-2007.

f. Turkmen Minister of Trade Reprimanded

Original title: *Minister of Trade Severely Reprimanded*

Source: turkmenistan.ru/05/06/08 Synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: http://www.turkmenistan.ru/?page_id=3&lang_id=en&elem_id=12702&type=event&sort=date_desc

Synopsis: President Berdymukhamedov issued a severe reprimand to Nokerguly Atagulyev, minister of trade and foreign economic relations, turkmenistan.ru reported. The penalty stemmed from a report by Tuvakmammet Japarov, chairman of the Supreme Audit Chamber Tuvakmammet Japarov who complained of poor sanitation at Turkmengallaonumleri, the association of bread products and food markets. Supervision had been lax at markets and shops, the report said, and had to be addressed urgently.

The president called for the provision of better -quality foodstuffs, and warned that Atagulyev would be released from his post if his performance did not improve.

g. National Dress at Issue in TV Censorship in Turkmenistan: Human Rights Group

Original title: *Fighting for Morality*

Source: [Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights/chronology-turkmen.org/04/30/08](http://turkmeninitiativeforhumanrights.org/chronology-turkmen/04/30/08). Translation and synopsis by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: <http://www.chrono-tm.org/?0257044042000000000000011000000>

Synopsis: Turkmen TV personnel are expected to demonstrate an innovative approach when producing TV programs as oversight in all areas – even dress codes – has increased, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR) reported. In April 2008, two executives were dismissed for poorly managing Turkmenistan's national television. Shadurdy Alovov, minister of culture and chairman of the executive office of Turkmen television, was severely reprimanded for the deteriorating quality of broadcasts and lax control over TV channels.

According to television staff members, the main reason for dissatisfaction over the poor performance of TV executives was a female news anchor's low-cut neckline.

"Needless to say, she was not wearing a low neckline, since Turkmen national dress, which news anchors are supposed to wear, does not include an exposed low neckline," a TV employee told TIHR. "However, every person makes judgments according to his/her beliefs and values. Perhaps, the collar was a bit wider than usual, but this was a typical Turkmen dress. Indeed, following the incident with the cockroach, managers are glued to the screen in an attempt to notice even minor flaws. Even if there are no flaws."

Another incident that took place in mid-April is also indicative of an atmosphere of tighter control. Activists who had invited a news crew to cover an environmental project in the Kopetdag nature preserve were told their dress was inappropriate. The television crew did not even remove the covers from the video cameras before announcing: "We are not going to make a broadcast because your clothes do not meet the dress code. You are supposed to wear long dresses with long sleeves, skull caps or kerchiefs." The activists were dressed in casual clothes (jeans and T-shirts), comfortable for field work.

"We just wanted to tell TV viewers about Turkmenistan's nature", the activists told TIHR.

h. Turkmen State Employees Forced to Accept Pay Deductions for Subscriptions

Original title: *Subscription to Periodicals is Under Way in Turkmenistan*

Source: Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights (TIHR)/chronom-tm.org/05/07/08 Excerpt by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: <http://www.chrono-tm.org/?0266044063000000000000011000000>

Excerpt: Despite the lack of choice in newspapers and magazines, circulation has not decreased and subscriber numbers remain the same. All employees are obliged to subscribe to periodicals.

[Passages omitted: on recent publication of periodicals catalogue; on Soyuzpechat, Soviet-era publication distribution system and similarities of current system, which forces the fulfillment of a plan for a required number of subscribers.]

The paradox is that all newspapers and magazines in Turkmenistan are alike and nobody reads them; yet, all of them fulfill their subscription plan. The main subscribers are the employees of state-sponsored and self-financing organizations, i.e. those who at least once per month pay salaries. This category is comprised of education and health care workers, employees of cultural and sports organizations, and law enforcement and military agencies. For instance, all school teachers, kindergarten workers and technical personnel in educational organizations are obliged to subscribe to *Mugallymlar Gazeti*, the teachers' newspaper; otherwise you are perceived by the administration as unpatriotic.

Subscription is not limited to one periodical. Apart from their specialized publications, teachers and kindergarten employees must accept several other periodicals; apparently with the aim of personal enrichment. Kindergarten workers have to receive *Gunesh*, the children's magazine, delivered by post to their homes. All teachers of Turkmen language and literature have to subscribe to the weekly *Turkmen Dili* (Turkmen Language) which is the cheapest of all newspapers: 5200 manats for six months – the equivalent of US \$0.30.

All members of the Democratic Party, trade unions, youth, veterans, women's and other public organizations must learn about national events from the newspapers *Galkynysh* (Revival), *Beik Turkmenbashi nesli* (Successors of Great Turkmenbashi) and the women's magazine *Gurbansoltan edje* named for the mother of the late president Saparmurt Niyazov.

Employees of the prosecutor's offices, courts, Interior Ministry, Ministry of National Security, Ministry of Defense and Border Service, the Office of Foreign Citizens' Registration, the Office of Illegal Drug Trade, the Customs Service and other similar agencies are ordered to subscribe to the newspapers *Adalat* (Justice), *Esger* (Warrior), *Milli goshun* (National Army), so these periodicals also face no decline in subscriptions. In addition, subscription costs for many of these publications; i.e. *Esger* and *Adalat* is below 13 thousand manats (less than U.S. \$1.00). Health care workers must also subscribe to other magazines like *Saglyk* (Health) which is issued once a month and costs 24 thousand manats. Health care workers (as with teachers and cultural workers) are forced to subscribe to other, more expensive periodicals, e.g. the newspapers *Turkmenistan* and *Neutral Turkmenistan* which come out times a week and cost 84 thousand manats (U.S. \$6.00).

[Passages omitted: Those in the provinces face greater expense as they must subscribe to both national and local papers and are assessed a mandatory sum for subscriptions of about US \$18.00 per month. Under this system, they are reluctant to choose any subscriptions but their supervisors decide for them.]

The boss orders the chief accountant to arrange subscriptions in accordance with the quotas received from government authorities. The accountant has no time to accommodate the wishes and interests of employees, so he or she assigns a certain number of newspapers and journals to each person, automatically deducts the cost of the subscriptions from their salaries, and transfers the funds to the account of Turkmenpochta, the distribution agency. Employees learn about these subscriptions only after the postman delivers the newspapers and magazines to their homes.

[Passage omitted: multiple copies are delivered to families regardless of redundancy.]

"Contrary to the expectations of many people, the content of newspapers has in fact not changed," says a "subscriber" who lives in Dashoguz. "No articles with suggestions on how to resolve local or national problems are published. Moreover, the very word 'problem' has been virtually eliminated in the press. We still only have endless successes and achievements. Apparently, the rise of newspaper circulation is one of these achievements," he said.

3. ECONOMIC NEWS

a. IMF Mission Visits Ashgabat

Original title: *Statement by an IMF Mission to Turkmenistan.*

Source: finchannel.com/05/06/08. Synopsis prepared by OSI Turkmenistan Project

Full version: http://finchannel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=11966&Itemid=8

Synopsis: An International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission led by Peter Winglee visited Ashgabat this week to conduct its annual Article IV Consultation with the Turkmen government, finchannel.com reported. The IMF will look at financial policy issues, especially foreign exchange rates.

The mission issued the following statement on May 2:

"The IMF team welcomes the important progress Turkmenistan has made over the past 18 months in economic reforms, especially the decisive move to unify the exchange rates of the manat on May 1. This step, together with supporting measures, will greatly benefit Turkmenistan's economic and financial development, and the country's integration into the international economy. The team reiterates its continued support for Turkmenistan's further reforms, including the currency redenomination at the start of 2009, and wishes the authorities success in meeting the challenges ahead."

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations have been prepared by OSI's Turkmenistan Project.

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